

Los Angeles County Strengthens Partnerships Through Its Community Transition Unit

CREATIVE, AMBITIOUS—the Community Transition Unit (CTU) of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department's (LASD) is one of the most notable jail projects in the U.S. today. The CTU has played a leading role in a major philosophical change in LASD jail operations and in the implementation of Jail Team Policing (JTP), best described as community oriented policing for the jails.

CTU's mission is to increase inmates' participation in educational, vocational, and other life-skills training programs and to assist with their successful reintegration into the community. These goals are met by establishing partnerships among correctional staff and with public and private community-based organizations and programs.

The costly expansion of jail construction and litigation resulting from overcrowding, violence, and the number of mentally ill inmates in jails has continued to plague our nation. America's "war on drugs" has resulted in 70% of inmates being incarcerated for substance abuse or controlled substance-related offenses. Moreover, growth in community oriented policing and problem solving arrests for "quality of life" offenses

has increased the number of homeless and mentally ill persons moving through our jails. In fact, more than half of the over 4,500 inmates housed in the LASD's Twin Towers Correctional Facility are diagnosed as acutely mentally ill, making it the largest mental institution in the nation. Within this environment, the CTU was born.

Upon taking office in December 1998, Sheriff Lee Baca immediately ordered an extensive study of how to create a significantly increased focus on inmate programs. By July 1999 a study had been completed, reviewed, and implemented by LASD administrators. The changes recommended by the study diverted scarce resources and divided command of the jails into two separate divisions, the Custody Operations Division and a new Correctional Services Division.

As a result of these changes, Custody Operations Division Chief Taylor Moorehead could focus on managing the security of eight of the LASD

jails housing approximately 20,000 inmates, whose average length of stay is 43 days. Meanwhile, the new Correctional Services Division, commanded by Chief Al Scaduto, could focus on jail programs and services. Responsibilities of this division include working with the county Department of Mental Health, managing the LASD medical services and food services, processing about 165,000 inmate bookings annually through the Inmate Reception Center, as well as supervising the ninth county jail, the innovative and program-intensive Biscailuz Recovery Center.

A NEWLY FORMED

Inmate Programs and Services Assessment Task Force in early 2000 recommended creation of the CTU as a promising way to accomplish the Sheriff's vision. LASD executives promptly concurred, and the CTU was launched that April.

Strong support from Sheriff Baca and LASD leaders resulted in preliminary approval by the Inmate Welfare

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Commission to use inmate welfare funds for an eventual forecasted CTU budget of \$5 million annually. The first year's budget of nearly \$1 million for 12 staff members, vehicles, and equipment quickly received approval from the commission and the LASD Budget Authority, comprised of sheriff's executives.

The entire LASD chain of command is involved in this endeavor, and everyone has demonstrated an extraordinary level of commitment to the CTU, its mission, and its hand-picked staff. Continuing the LASD emphasis on inmate programming, a new management position was created; Dr. Karen Dalton became Director of Inmate Programs in late 2000. Her related expertise is significant, as she recently completed her doctoral dissertation on the reduction of inmate recidivism among those involved in CTU-type programs. She also has extensive experience in creating and coordinating inmate programs and working with related community-based resources.

ALTHOUGH JAILS ARE not typically perceived as partnering with the community or with public and private organizations, the CTU is changing this thinking. The CTU staff and LASD leadership, including Sheriff Baca, have formed partnerships and networked in small group sessions as well as at major events attended by hundreds of people from over 100 organizations.

Interaction with a multitude of partners has helped the CTU identify its primary inmate target groups as the homeless, mentally ill persons, veterans, females, inmates with HIV/AIDS, and homosexual inmates. These inmate groups were chosen as the most likely to succeed because of LASD support, an institutional foundation for them, and outreach that indicated they have the greatest level of interest, funding, and community support. Partnerships now exist in many different forms, and they range in scope from simple to multifaceted.

Following are a few examples of the partnerships now in place:

- Case workers from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) work with the CTU to ensure the best use of veteran inmates' time in jail programs, and then to link them to VA benefits, job training, and housing upon release.
- The Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and the LASD work with the Salvation Army and other groups to provide a continuum of care for mentally ill persons, including housing for dually diagnosed (mentally ill and substance abusing) inmates upon their release.
- The Volunteers of America staff works with LASD Medical Services to provide housing and medical treatment linkages for

terminally ill inmates soon to be released.

- A number of community-based HIV/AIDS service providers work with deputy sheriffs, Medical Services staff, and the Hacienda La Puente School District to provide HIV/AIDS inmates with vocational and educational training, as well as to link homosexual inmates to jobs and housing.

Many partnerships existed before the CTU was formed. However, the unifying mission of the CTU has dramatically increased the effectiveness and expansion of these efforts.

These initial partnerships have also identified many key needs that the CTU must address first, if targeted inmates are to succeed. These needs include social security cards, photo identification, VA identification cards, and transportation from the jail release area. Although there are many predictable complications, work on these and other issues is already under way.

TO LEARN ABOUT THE changes implicit in the shift to the CTU model, hundreds of jail sworn and civilian line staff have attended major CTU events or unit briefings. As often happens when community policing is introduced to patrol officers, many employees initially greeted the introduction of the CTU with skepticism. Most are relieved when they understand that they don't

have to become "social workers." Instead, they are asked to maintain security while facilitating the interaction with those who are helping the inmates to help themselves.

After hearing it explained, most staff either have accepted the CTU program or are generally positive about it. Many have privately said, "It's about time." It is a reality, however, that it will take time to change the mindset of 5,000 sworn and civilian jail personnel. Experience is showing that a positive change in inmate behavior changes the views of many.

The sheriff himself has said that at least half of the LASD inmates (such as those who are en route to state prison, violent towards law enforcement, or hard-core gang members) will not be eligible for CTU intervention. Instead, CTU's focus is on inmates who are willing to work to improve themselves and who will soon be returning to the streets of Los Angeles County.

The unusually positive media coverage of the jails, the enthusiastic public response, and the good will achieved by the CTU are remarkable, and CTU's successes are fueling increased participation. It is not yet possible to identify the exact number of inmates receiving intervention because there is no universal reporting mechanism, but available data point to increasing inmate involvement in CTU. For example, there has been an increase from 100 to 500 mili-

tary veterans receiving intervention monthly from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Additionally, over 3,000 inmates are involved in jail programs every day, and the numbers are increasing.

SECURITY IS STILL THE number one priority of the nation's largest jail system. By using Jail Team Policing approaches, dramatic progress is being made in reducing jail violence and tension, while simultaneously reducing recidivism and, ultimately, street crime.

By increasing the number of inmates participating in vocational and educational programs and linking them to jobs and housing upon their release, the CTU and LASD are improving the lives of inmates, their families, their victims, jail staff, and all our communities. ■

Please watch for a more detailed description of the Community Transition Unit in an upcoming issue of American Jails magazine.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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